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ABSTRACT

The nature and extent of the news media coverage of political advertising in the presidential campaign of 1972 was shallow and spotty at best. The candidates' political advertising strategies received limited coverage by reporters and commentators. Even the "prestige" press--16 major newspapers--provided limited coverage to the nature and problems of political advertising. Pollsters, however, reports that political advertising had a profound effect on the public's rank-ordering of campaign issues. Thus, it can be concluded that an important aspect of the 1972 campaign, the nature and effects of political advertising, was virtually ignored by the news media. (CH)

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"THE COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING BY THE PRESTIGE PRESS IN 1972"

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During political campaigns, the news media perform one of their most important functions: to help the citizenry correlate their responses and to arrive at a consensus in the selection of their elected officials.[1] One of the ways they do this is by devoting considerable time and space to reporting the activities and announcements of the candidates. Everything a candidate says or does not say, as well as the activities of his family, are reported on radio and television as well as in newspapers and magazines.

The news media do more than just chronicle candidate activities, however They also analyze, interpret, and even attempt to persuade their readers and viewers. A candidate's activities may be reported one day, interpreted the second, and soundly attacked the third.

Traditionally, however, the news media have devoted much less attention to another aspect of candidate behavior: advertising or paid media appearances. This is despite the fact that candidates at all electoral levels have placed increasing emphasis upon paid advertising. Despite the inaccuracies, campaign expenditure figures document the increased use of paid advertising. Nimmo reports that the total money spent on all campaigns was $140 million in 1952, $155 million in 1956, $175 million in 1960, $200 million in 1964 and more than $250 million in 1968.[2] It is perhaps too early to estimate the total expenditures for the 1972 elections, but one source estimates total expenditures at over $500 million.[3]

Political advertising is also worthy of media attention because it does contain information about issues as well as about candidate qualifications and personalities. In an earlier article, the author reported that nearly half the content of advertising for a sample of senatorial, gubernatorial and congressional candidates was about issues and one-third was about candidate characteristics.[4] There was also a high correlation between the rank order of issues mentioned in the advertising and the rank order of issues cited

in a national public opinion survey during the campaign.[5]

The apparent concern with issues in the advertising, however, suggests another reason why political advertising needs more coverage and attention from the news media. In some cases, it seemed apparent that candidates included a discussion of issues in their advertising largely for the sake of talking about issues--as if in an attempt to counter the traditional criticism of political advertising being too image-oriented. An incumbent senatorial candidate, for example, devoted two full newspaper pages (small type) to a recounting of his six-year record in the Senate. It included such "accomplishments" as "support" for certain legislation or co-sponsorship of resolutions.

It is not likely that many voters would attempt to wade through such an ad in order to learn more about the candidate and his record on the issues. Such an ad, however, would provide ample documentation for claims that the candidate was issue-oriented in his advertising. Nor is it likely that many voters would perceive that many of the "issues" a candidate takes a stand on in his advertising will never be put to the test. For example, an incumbent could claim that he had voted for a specific bill but fail to mention that the bill was never reported out of committee. A candidate could promise to support certain legislation while knowing that such legislation might never be introduced or be subject to a voice vote. A gubernatorial candidate could promise certain changes in state government while knowing the responsibility for such changes rested with the state legislature.

These problems suggest that a candidate's political advertising can be as important as his speeches or press conferences and statements. Taken with the realization of the potential for deceit, they suggest the importance of the news media treating candidate advertising as another campaign event to be reported, analyzed, and interpreted.

The purpose of this exploratory study, then, was to examine the extent and nature of the reporting and analysis--the coverage--of political advertising by the news media. While there have been numerous studies about the coverage of campaign news and events,[6] none to date have focused upon the coverage of political advertising as a campaign event.

METHOD

Specifically, the study was a descriptive and exploratory content analysis of the coverage of political advertising by the "prestige press" in the 1972 campaign. The prestige press is a sample of 15 dailies considered to be the leading newspapers in the United States: New York Times, Christian Science Monitor, Milwaukee Journal, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Washington Post, Louisville Courier-Journal, Wall Street Journal, Atlanta Constitution, Chicago Tribune, Des Moines Register, Kansas City Star, Baltimore Sun, Miami Herald, Chicago Daily News, and Los Angeles Times.

This sample has been used in numerous studies of campaign coverage, most notably three by Stempel.[7] In addition to that fact, the prestige press sample was used in the present study for two other reasons. First, due to the exploratory nature of the study, it was desirable that the sample be small in size for the sake of economy. Second, it was assumed that the newspapers in the sample, because of their supposed positions of leadership, would be more likely than other newspapers to provide coverage of political advertising. The study was limited to newspapers to facilitate data collection; the newspaper items were permanent and the inclusion of television would have required expensive monitoring of news programs. Since there was some uncertainty about the quantity of material relevant to the study, each issue of the 15 newspapers was examined between September 15 and November 10, 1972. The ending date was the Friday after the Tuesday elections.

Coders carefully examined each issue, looking for articles, editorials or other items in which political advertising was mentioned. There was no

restriction on the electoral level to be included; the items could be about a mayoral candidate as well as a presidential hopeful. Coders made photocopies of each item and recorded information about the date of publication, page number and page placement. Before the actual coding, the author checked each item to ensure that it did relate to political advertising.

RESULTS

Coverage: Where, When, and How?

During the eight weeks covered by the study, the 15 prestige newspapers contained 67 items--news stories and analyses--in which political advertising was mentioned. The leading papers--in terms of number of items--were the Chicago Tribune (14), Baltimore Sun (9), Des Moines Register and Atlanta Constitution (7 each), and the Louisville Courier-Journal (6). However, quantity was not necessarily associated with quality, as later discussion will point out. In addition, of course, the data about extent of coverage would be more meaningful if it could be stated in terms of the proportion of total coverage of all campaign news. Such data were not collected in this study; it is probable, however, that the total of 67 items would be a very small proportion of the total number of campaign items.

When analyzed across time, the coverage of political advertising was most extensive early in the campaign, tapered off during the middle weeks, and increased again as the campaign drew to an end. Twenty items appeared in the first week and 11 in the second. Coverage then dropped off to 5,4,4, and 2 items per week. In the week before the campaign ended,the total increased to 14 items and then declined to 7 items in the last week of the study, which included three days after the election.

Besides their own staffs, of course, newspapers rely upon wire services and syndicates to provide news and analysis items. About two- thirds (47)

of the items originated with the staffs of the newspapers. The rest originated primarily with the Associated Press and United Press International. Only 1 of the 67 items carried any kind of label which clearly identified it as analysis, background, or commentary, despite the fact that many more could easily be considered interpretation.

Coverage: What Kind of Advertising?

By far, the coverage was concentrated upon the advertising in the presidential campaigns. Seventy-five percent (50) of the items included some discussion or mention of the presidential candidates' advertising. The remainder were primarily concerned with senatorial, gubernatorial, and congressional candidates. Very few of the items discussed advertising in state legislature or county elections.

Coverage was evenly divided between candidates of the two major parties. Twenty-five items mentioned advertising for Republican candidates and 30 items mentioned advertising for Democrats. A few items discussed advertising for both parties as well as the advertising for minor party candidates.

Advertising on television received more coverage than advertising on radio or in newspapers. About 35 percent (24) of the items discussed television advertising. Radio and newspaper advertising were each discussed in 6 items. Counting the items in which more than one advertising medium was discussed, television advertising was mentioned in 40 items, radio advertising in 20, and newspaper advertising in 11. This concentration of coverage upon the electronic media, of course, parallels the relative efforts of the candidates in those media. Most of the coverage was about advertising for presidential candidates, and presidential candidates tend to concentrate their advertising in television and radio.

Coverage: Which Aspects of Advertising?

The items analyzed in this study included all news stories, analyses, and commentaries in which political advertising was at least mentioned. In many of the items, advertising received little more than brief mention, perhaps only a sentence or less. For example, an item might have been about the activities of a certain candidate and said he had spent half a day taping or filming a television commercial. Other items reported that one of the candidate's many press releases was an answer to a charge made against him in his opponent's advertising.

In many items, however, candidate advertising was the major theme. These items were defined as the ones in which political advertising was mentioned in the headline or the lead, and included 31 of the 67 items analyzed. These items, then, provide a much more meaningful indication of the extent and nature of the coverage of political advertising. They give an insight into the quality of the coverage as opposed to its mere quantity.

These items centered around two basic trends in the advertising strategy of the presidential candidates: (1) Senator McGovern's many shifts in advertising strategy and (2) President Nixon's final "blitz" of paid radio and television appearances. Receiving less coverage was the cost of advertising and the reporting of advertising expenditures.

Coverage of McGovern Advertising. One of the earliest articles with a major theme of McGovern advertising was a September 18th article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, headlined "Democrats Going All Out For TV." It focused upon a preview of McGovern's strategy for television commercials but also discussed the Nixon advertising plans. The article, written by a P-D Washington correspondent, discussed the importance and cost of television commercials for presidential candidates. It told how Nixon would probably receive more free exposure than McGovern because he was the incumbent President. The story

described how both candidates had employed the use of well-known film producers to make their commercials--Guggenheim Productions for Senator McGovern and Wolper Productions, Inc. for President Nixon. The correspondent speculated about the probable content of the Nixon commercials and described a few McGovern commercials he had seen. He also described President Nixon's plan to use radio advertising because of his past problems with his image on television and also discussed the problems of buying advertising time from the television networks.

At about the same time, an article in the Baltimore Sun reported the plans for a McGovern spot television schedule in 24 states and the District of Columbia. Those states, according to the article, accounted for 352 electoral votes, which would have been a slim margin over the 270 votes needed for victory. This article also described the content of the McGovern commercials produced by Guggenheim Productions, including some direct quotations. It was also pointed out that the advertising and personal appearance strategies were closely allied: the candidate was making most of his appearances in the states in which his advertising was concentrated.

A few days later, on September 23, a lengthy Washington Post article reported a shift in the McGovern advertising strategy away from 60-second spots toward half-hour programs and chronicled the problems the McGovern organization faced in getting the television networks to make the time available. According to the report, Campaign Chairman Lawrence F. O'Brien had cancelled $250,000 worth of 60-second spots and was negotiating with the networks for nine prime time half-hour slots. The reason given for the shift in strategy was the belief that one minute was not adequate to tell the story the McGovern organization wanted to tell.

Money was clearly given as another reason for the shift. The $250,000 was to be used to buy newspaper advertising space to promote the half-hour television programs. In addition, as the article explained, it was actually

cheaper for the candidate to purchase a half-hour of time than to purchase a couple of 60-second commercials. The problems of dealing with the networks were also documented in the story. Prior to that time, the networks had reportedly made available only a few half-hour time segments to the presidential candidates, mostly late in the campaign and on election eve. The story pointed out that the networks were somewhat reluctant to provide the additional segments to McGovern because they would then have to make available similar time segments to the Nixon organization.

A few days later, a UPI dispatch reported more details of the shift in strategy, announcing that the first of the McGovern half-hour programs, a film biography, was scheduled for CBS in a few days. The story further reported the probable dates of future half-hour programs. It mentioned the earlier problems of securing the time slots from the networks, but reported that Lawrence O'Brien had successfully negotiated the necessary arrangements.

Soon after the reports of the shift in McGovern advertising strategy, the inevitable commentary and interpretation appeared. Marquis Childs, for example, briefly explained the reasons for the shift and the problems of getting additional time from the networks. To him, the concern over television advertising served to reinforce the conclusion that television had clearly come to dominate the American political process. Childs reviewed the first McGovern film--the biography--and credited it with revealing the candidate to be a good man but not a stern man. Unfortunately, Childs continued, McGovern would probably not be able to correct this image because of the cost and difficulties of getting television time as well as the dominance of the news shows by the incumbent President.

Nick Thimmesch also commented on McGovern's shift to the "fireside chats." He discussed the belief of the McGovern organization that their candidate was not coming across well on the news shows and in the shorter television spots.

Thimmesch opined that even the new formats would not overcome the basic McGovern weakness of indecisiveness. He then proceeded to tear apart the McGovern biography, pointing out that the newsreel footage of an airplane crash landing was not really McGovern's plane, as was clearly connoted. Also, Thimmesch pointed out, the film failed to mention that the reason McGovern had been chosen by President Kennedy to head the Food For Peace program was because he had lost his congressional seat. In summary, Thimmesch concluded that not even the shift to half-hour programs would do McGovern much good.

A later shift in the McGovern ad strategy was reported in the October 10th issue of the Baltimore Sun. According to the report, Senator McGovern planned to switch the anti-Nixon themes in his television spots and to initiate a planned series of 30-minute regional programs in which he would answer telephoned questions. The move to the negative spots attacking President Nixon was apparently against the preferences of producer and adviser Charles Guggenheim, who reportedly preferred the positive ads in which McGovern talked to groups of people. The plan for the new ads was to actually feature the President and then attack his record.

Money was also reported to be a problem, for the McGovern organization had to raise money to buy network time for the new 60-second commercials. Money for the regional programs would hopefully come from local sources. The objective behind this regional strategy as well as the candidate's scheduled personal appearances was to reach as many voters as possible in the key electoral states.

A reduction in personal appearances and increased emphasis upon paid television time was the last reported shift in the McGovern strategy. According to the Chicago Tribune on October 24th, the Democratic candidate was reducing his scheduled personal appearances from three or four a day to only one or two. The reason for the shift was purely quantitative: he could reach millions by television and only hundreds by personal appearances.

Coverage of Nixon Advertising. If one thinks of a candidate's advertising as campaign events, there were fewer events for the newspapers to cover in the Nixon campaign than in the McGovern campaign. This was due primarily to the fact that the President's advertising campaign began later than his opponent's and apparently did not deviate much from the original plans. As the previous pages made clear, most coverage of McGovern advertising centered around changes in strategy. Another possible reason for the less extensive coverage of the Nixon advertising may simply have been the over-all reticence of the Nixon organization. The nature of the McGovern coverage suggested that the reporters had at least some access to top strategists.

Most of the coverage of the Nixon advertising effort came at the end of the campaign with the reports of the plans for the final "blitz" over radio and television. The Chicago Tribune reported these plans on November 1st, providing the schedule of the radio and television appearances and some of the scheduled topics. According to the story, the announcement of the media plans came from the White House.

The Nixon campaign utilized radio more than any recent presidential campaign and this fact did not escape unnoticed. A "background report" in the Miami Herald (November 4) described some of the Nixon radio speeches and quoted Nixon organization personnel to explain the reasoning behind the use of radio. A very basic justification, according to Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler, was that "a lot of people listen to radio--really."

An unidentified Nixon campaign worker told the reporter that the use of radio fit into the overall campaign strategy of maintaining a low profile against Senator McGovern. In addition, according to campaign officials quoted in the story, radio "is cheap, reaches a lot of people, gets a surprising amount of attention from the writing press, and is a medium the President feels comfortable with." In other words, the choice of radio as an advertising medium was based at least in part on the belief that the print media would report what the

President said in his paid radio spots. The assumption was correct: the news media did report the President's radio addresses as campaign events and some of the coverage did mention the fact that the speeches were delivered on paid radio time. This was true, for example, in the November 6th reports by the New York Times News Service and the Chicago Daily News. These reports reviewed the content of the President's radio address and announced that he would appear on an election-eve television telecast.

Coverage of the Cost Problem.

The third major category of campaign advertising coverage included the reporting of advertising expenses as part of the requirements of the federal campaign spending law. Many stories listed the names and occupations of contributors and mentioned advertising as a campaign expense, one of the reasons behind the need for money. In a few cases, however, the advertising aspect was the central theme of the stories. A Miami Herald story on November 1st, for example, reported that a substantial portion of the advertising bill of the "Democrats for Nixon" was paid by Republicans. The story documented this fact by citing the names of the contributors to the "Democrats for Nixon" organization.

Other cost-related stories focused upon the total expenditures of the two campaign organizations. Stories on November 4th in the Baltimore Sun and the Washington Post told how the presidential candidates had already spent over $50 million since April and predicted that the 1972 presidential campaign would be the most expensive in history. The stories provided a breakdown of the advertising expenditures by medium.

A slightly different angle to the cost story was discussed in the Wall Street Journal on October 2nd. The reporter described in detail the problems of the Federal Communications Commission in trying to ensure compliance with

the new spending law. One problem for example, arose when Senator McGovern appeared on national television to announce the selection of Sargent Shriver as his second vice-presidential running mate. Republicans claimed that they deserved equal time but were turned down because the GOP convention had not yet been held and therefore President Nixon was not a legally qualified candidate.

Coverage at non-Presidential Levels.

The preceding discussion of prestige press coverage of political advertising concentrated upon the presidential campaigns because most of the coverage in which political advertising was the central theme was about the presidential candidates. At least one notable exception is worthy of me tion: a September 25th story in the Miami Herald which dealt at some length with the role public relations consultants were playing in various campaigns in Dade County. The reporters examined several candidates, reporting what the consultants had done for them, how much they had charged, why they did the things they did, and the candidates' reasons for hiring the consultants. The story even included a box-score listing of candidates and consultants. To the credit of the two writers, their story stayed above the usual level of sensational charges of interference in democracy. Instead, the story explained that many candidates perceived a problem--lack of awareness by the public and their own lack of knowledge of how to conduct a modern media-oriented campaign. On the other hand, the story was quite frank in explaining that many of the consultants advised their clients on which issues to emphasize and what to say about them.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this study was to ascertain the nature of the coverage of political advertising in 1972 by the prestige press. In terms of quantity,

the coverage was meager: only 67 stories even mentioned political advertising and about half of those included only a brief mention.

The conclusions are somewhat more encouraging when one looks at the stories in which political advertising was the major theme. Several stories examined the problems of candidates and explained how the candidates planned to use advertising to attempt to overcome those problems. Other stories reported shifts in advertising strategy in response to changing perceptions of campaign conditions.

Nevertheless, these stories were the exception and not the rule, and one cannot help but wonder if the newspapers in the prestige press sample were doing an adequate job of explaining the role and function of advertising in political campaigns. This was certainly true in the coverage of campaigns below the presidential level. Coverage was concentrated upon advertising in television, radio and newspapers; very little was written about the increased reliance upon direct mail and telephones as advertising media for political candidates.

The sample, of course, was limited, and it is possible that other newspapers did a more complete job of covering political advertising than the prestige press did. Furthermore, the electronic news media were not included in this study. News magazines were analyzed, however, and the coverage was even more meager than in the prestige newspapers. Further research could examine the coverage of political advertising in other newspapers as well as the other news media. Political advertising has become more and more a part of American election campaigns and it is not unreasonable to assume that this will continue to happen. It does not seem to be too much to expect the news media to do a more complete job of covering this important subject as a campaign event.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William L. Rivers and Wilbur Schramm, Responsibility in Mass Communication, Rev. Ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) p. 15.

[2]Dan Nimmo, The Political Persuaders (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 2.

[3]E.B. Weiss, "Political Advertising Blackens the Other Eye of the Ad Business," Advertising Age, February 12, 1973, pp. 35-36.

[4]Thomas A. Bowers, "Issue and Personality Information in Newspaper Political Advertising," Journalism Quarterly, 49: 446-52 (Autumn 1972).

[5]Thomas A. Bowers, "Political Advertising and the Agenda-Setting Function," Journalism Quarterly, in press.

[6]The leading studies of campaign coverage are cited in Maxwell E. McCombs, "Mass Communication in Political Campaigns: Information, Gratification, and Persuasion," in F. Gerald Kline and Phillip J. Tichenor, eds., Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972), p. 170.

[7]Guido H. Stempel III, "The Prestige Press Covers the 1960 Presidential Campaign," Journalism Quarterly, 38: 157-63 (1961); "The Prestige Press in Two Presidential Elections," Journalism Quarterly, 42: 15-21 (1965); and "The Prestige Press Meets the Third-Party Challenge," Journalism Quarterly, 46: 699-706 (1969).